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TL 3174

Statement of Martinho da Costa Lopes, Apostolic Administrator of East Timor, 1977-83

To the American Catholic Bishops' Committee For Social Development and World Peace

Washington, D.C., June 12, 1984

Dear Archbishop, Bishops, and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to share with you reflections on the situation in my native land, East Timor. A former Portuguese colony, East Timor is geographically distant from the United States, and since 1975, when Indonesia invaded the territory, we have been almost completely isolated from the outside world. As I have noted in recent meetings here in the United States, it took more than two months for a letter dated Feb. 18, 1984 from my successor, Mgsr. Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo, to reach me in Portugal (where I now live), as the letter had to be sent by clandestine means. Because of the isolation of East Timor, it is my impression that until now the Catholic Church in America has generally known little about the Catholic Church in East Timor or of the unspeakable human suffering and oppression that have continued since the Indonesian invasion -- an invasion that has claimed well over 100,000 East Timorese lives.

The Catholic Church in East Timor has a long history, dating back to the 16th century. But since the 1975 Indonesian invasion, our Church has seen its spiritual and material tasks greatly multiplied. We administer a wide range of programs -- from homes for 13,000 orphans, work projects for widows, to more than 70 schools of various levels with more than 20,000 students, as well as a variety of other activities too lengthy to discuss here. Perhaps because of the sea of suffering that has engulfed us, the East Timorese people have increasingly turned to God and the Catholic Church (As of Dec. 31, 1982, 47 Percent of East Timor's approximately 550,000 people were Catholic). We have ministered to those who have faced the atrocities committed by the Indonesian forces, the victims of torture, rape, beatings, inhuman prison conditions. In face of the cultural and psychological genocide that the Indonesian Army has imposed on us, the largescale deaths, whether directly from the war or indirectly from starvation and disease, the Catholic Church has emerged as the only organization that the East Timorese people trust. There is a special and profound respect for the Church. Everything the people know they tell to the priests. The East Timor Church has listened intently for the nearly nine years since the Indonesian invasion. With the highest authority the East Timorese Church can say that it knows the plight as well as the deepest aspirations of the people.

And the conclusions we have reached are these. The East Timorese people must exercise their internationally-recognized right to self-determination, in accordance with the United Nations Charter and other international covenants. This right has not been exercised, as even the U.S. State Department acknowledges. No matter how difficult the achievement of this right for the people of East Timor may now appear, the world must continue to insist that genuine self-determination

be carried out. In the absence of genuine self-determination and independence for East Timor, the war and misery in East Timor will continue indefinitely.

We in the Church in East Timor live with the consequences of this war every day and while we are far from the centers of political power, we know what we see. What we see are battalion after battalion of fresh Indonesian troops sent to fight the deeply Catholic, nationalist guerillas of FRETILIN (Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor). We see mass arrests, forced marches of thousands of villagers who Indonesian troops try to use as human bait in the fight against their brothers, villagers who die miserable deaths often without even a decent burial. The fact that the Indonesian military finds it necessary to send thousands upon thousands of fresh troops and on top of this enlist the local population in their evil operations is but one sign that a strong nationalist resistanc continues in East Timor. But we in the Church know that the resistance of the East Timorese people continues on all levels -- in their hearts and souls, in their prayers to God.

I must say that I would have no objection if the East Timorese people, free of all pressure, internal and external, would freely choose to be part of Indonesia. But I am convinced that more than 90 percent, if not 99 percent, would vote against it. It is my opinion that only through dialogue, and not through military means, can there be a lasting and just solution to the tragedy in East Timor. Western nations that proclaim the principles of justice, liberty and self-determination cannot fail to support such a process.

My second conclusion is that the isolation of East Timor must end immediately. Indonesia must be compelled to open East Timor to all international humanitarian and relief agencies that want to operate there, to foreign medical teams, to all independent journalists, international church groups and other independent information-gathering organizations, and access to East Timor should be completely unrestricted. Until now, there have been very few observers of this kind to visit the territory.

I must stress, however, that it would be tragic illusion, or a cynical one, to believe that humanitarian aid and material things will by themselves solve the question of East Timor. The Indonesian military, which is responsible for many tens of thousands of deaths in East Timor, is brazen enough to boast of all the money it has spent in East Timor on roads, buildings and other facilities, which are frequently used in any case for military purposes or to otherwise facilitate their occupation of the territory. But no material goods can ever compensate for the denial of self-determination and independence, for the unending bloodshed and violence, which surely continues even as we meet. Pray for our deliverance.

Finally, I move to a point of special gravity, namely that of the recent persecution of the Church in East Timor, as mentioned by my successor in his Feb. 18 letter. I view these moves against the Church with the utmost seriousness, and would like to share a reflection based on my long experience. There is great resentment among certain elements of the Indonesian Armed Forces against the Church in East Timor, not only because of the Church's moral authority and independent organizational strength, but also because, despite constant pressure by the Indonesian military, the Church refuses to call upon the guerillas of FRETILIN to lay down their arms. We refuse for one basic reason: in the past, many surrendered guerillas were executed. The East Timorese Church has no reason to trust Indonesian promises in this regard. For this refusal on our part we are now the target of retaliation. And in the final analysis, as I have stressed, the only crime the East Timorese who resist have committed is their fervent wish to be free and independent. This is the basic issue. Once again, I ask you to pray for us.

Martinho da Costa Lopes
June 7, 1984